

Politics

Middletown Woman Meets With Obama On Day Of Historic Speech To Muslims



Khadija Gurnah of Middletown, from a previous meeting with the president (Courtesy of Khadija Gurnah) (Khadija Gurnah)



By **Shawn R. Beals** · Contact Reporter

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A Middletown woman, one of about a dozen to meet with President **Barack Obama** privately on Wednesday, said the president made a powerful statement supporting American Muslims as they face overt anti-Islamic views.

Khadija Gurnah, a mother of three and a public health educator, said she is optimistic that Obama's speech at the Islamic Society of Baltimore will help ensure that isolated acts of hatred and violence will not be used to define more than a billion Muslims.

Obama's appearance Wednesday was his first visit to a mosque in the United States since becoming president and focused largely on working against anti-Muslim sentiments. He asked for tolerance and acceptance of the Islamic faith and celebrated Muslim traditions in the United States.

Gurnah has a master's degree from **Yale University** and has worked for years doing public health outreach in the Muslim community. Recently, she has worked with Moms Rising — a group that describes itself as a "grassroots organization of more than a million people who are working to achieve economic security for all moms, women, and families in the United States" — to address the growing anxiety of Muslim young people.

"The only way we as a community will be able to move beyond this is to avoid a single narrative, and that's the space I work in," Gurnah said in a phone interview Wednesday afternoon as she was traveling back to Middletown.

"To have the opportunity to speak to [Obama] and to hear him talk about the issues I am very passionate about, it was an amazing experience," she said.

The 45-minute speech at a large mosque in suburban Baltimore was attended by some of the country's most prominent Muslims. In what appeared to be an effort to counter a rise in Islamophobia, Obama celebrated the long history of Muslim achievement in American life, from sports to architecture, and described Muslims as Cub Scouts, soldiers and parents — pointing out the mother of the pre-med college student who introduced him at the podium.

Gurnah was one of about a dozen who met with Obama before his speech. Last week, Obama spoke at the Israeli Embassy, a first for a sitting president, and on Thursday he is scheduled to speak at the National Prayer Breakfast, a high-profile evangelical event.

"There are voices who are constantly claiming you have to choose between your identities. ... Do not believe them. ... You fit in here. Right here. You're right where you belong. You're part of America, too," Obama said, his volume rising as he addressed young Muslim Americans. "You're not Muslim or American, you're Muslim and American. And don't grow cynical."

Gurnah said she was encouraged by Obama's message and his commitment to push back against Islamophobia, which has at times dominated the national debate during the run-up to the presidential election.

"One of the most complicated things that's happening with the rhetoric is the 'othering' that we see," Gurnah said. "I am an immigrant from Kenya, and my husband is Puerto Rican, and this is the only home he has ever known. My kids are black and Puerto Rican and they are nothing but American."

She said Middletown and the rest of Connecticut are open and welcoming to her family and other Muslims, but many Muslims do not have the benefit of living in a tolerant environment.

"One of the things I've noticed in my outreach is that there's a lot of anxiety among Muslim youth.

"They're the ones on social media," Gurnah said. "I was concerned about that. These young adults are my children in 10 years' time, so I wanted to have programs and support in place that they would need."

Gurnah was recognized in 2014 as a "Champion of Change" by the White House for her work as program manager for the American Muslim Health Professionals' Affordable Care Act outreach and enrollment and is a board of trustees member at the Independent Day School in Middlefield. She also volunteers with New Haven-based Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services and worked for several years at the Community Health Center in Middletown doing Medicaid outreach and tobacco prevention.

Other participants in the pre-speech roundtable were Ibtihaj Muhammad, a member of the U.S. fencing team who will be the first Olympian to compete in a hijab if she makes it into the 2016 games in Rio; Rami Nashashibi, an artist who directs the Inner-City Muslim Action Network and runs a holistic health center; Imam Khalid Latif, chaplain of the Islamic Center at New York University; Khadija Gurnah, who founded a project for young Muslims; and Suzanne Barakat, a San Francisco doctor whose brother and sister-in-law died in the Chapel Hill killings last year.

Muslim American leaders have been pushing for years for Obama to visit a mosque because they feel their community has been defined, and stigmatized, since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks by images of Muslims related to terrorism, including those from the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino and Islamic State militants. The expression experts often use is that Muslims are stuck in front of a "security lens."

A Washington Post report is included in this story.

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